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The Kurdish Question in Turkey
New perspectives on violence, representation, and reconciliation
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Contents

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8 Confederalism and autonomy in Turkey

The Kurdistan Workers' Party and the reinvention of democracy[1]

Ahmet Hamdi Akkaya and Joost Jongerden

Introduction

After a long period of 'national liberation struggle' aimed at establishing an independent state, the Kurdish movement in Turkey led by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*, PKK), has changed course and set its aim towards a project of radical democracy. Just as the Turkish state has been unable to quash the Kurdish identity and its political expression through decades of assimilation and oppression, so the PKK has not been able to overthrow the state systems of control through protracted guerrilla war. In its 1978 manifesto, the PKK had called for the destruction of all forms of colonialism and the construction of a united Kurdistan. Today, however, leading figures in the PKK argue that socialists should not fixate so much on the state as on their political project. In other words, alongside recognition of the limitations of further use of violence, there has come a profound change in the organisation's philosophical approach.[2] Inverting Lenin's thesis that 'it would be wrong to interpret the right to self-determination as meaning anything but the right to existence as a separate state' (Lenin 1914), the PKK states, in effect, that it is wrong to interpret the right to self-determination as having no other meaning than the right to exist as a separate state. This is a view confirmed, moreover, in the historical analysis of the modern state as a bourgeois project (Karasu 2009).

Although the PKK's ideological formation in the 1970s was not much different from other liberation movements of the period, the PKK tried to develop its own understanding of socialism even during the period of its formation, breaking away from conventional communist doctrine imported from the Soviet Union or China. After the 1999 capture of Abdullah Öcalan, its now imprisoned leader, the organisation made a pronounced turn towards a project of radical democracy, rejecting not only what he called the 'classical Kurdish nationalist line', but also 'a leftist interpretation of a similar tendency' (Öcalan 1999: 10).[3] In his subsequent 'defence texts', submitted to an Athens court and the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) Grand Chamber, Öcalan transformed his

theoretical considerations into a conception of what he termed 'radical democracy'.

This idea of radical democracy – radical in the sense that it tries to develop the concept of democracy beyond nation and state – is developed in three projects: one for a democratic republic (of Turkey), one for democratic confederalism, and one for democratic autonomy. The project for a democratic republic comprehends a reform of the Republic of Turkey, disassociating citizenship from nationalism. The idea of democratic confederalism – developed, like that of democratic autonomy, in the later defence texts – is defined as a model for 'democratic self-government' (Öcalan 2008: 32). Since these, it is proposed, are to be built throughout Kurdistan (and wherever Kurds are living), democratic confederalism is to be considered the main mechanism for the unification of Kurds and Kurdistan. The Kurdish liberation movement, Öcalan argues, should work for the establishment of such a system of self-organisation. Democratic confederalism is also twinned to democratic autonomy, referring to the right of people to determine their own economic, cultural, and social affairs. While the democratic republic is a project of state reform, the projects of democratic confederalism and democratic autonomy embody the idea of a politics beyond and without the state (Akkaya and Jongerden 2011).

In this article we have two objectives. The first is to explore how the PKK makes sense of the projects of democratic confederalism and democratic autonomy. This promises to advance our understanding of the PKK in particular, and to contribute to radical politics in general. Second, a genealogy of democratic confederalism and democratic autonomy brings our attention to the work of Murray Bookchin, who influenced Abdullah Öcalan.[4]

The radical thinker Bookchin called his ideology 'communalism' and 'libertarian municipalism'. This aims at creating local democratic structures such as 'community assemblies, town meetings and neighbourhood councils'. To prevent the project of libertarian municipalism from becoming vacuous or being used for highly parochial ends, Bookchin suggests the principle of confederalism, as a 'network' of local democratic assemblies (Bookchin 1993). For Bookchin, confederalism as a principle of social organisation is a way of 'democratizing the interdependence without surrendering the principle of local control'. The establishment of 'direct-democratic popular assemblies at the municipal, town, and neighbourhood levels', in their confederated form becomes an alternative to the nation-state.[5]

Our discussion of the democratic-confederalism and democratic-autonomy projects is thus part of a more general discussion in radical politics and contemporary Marxism. Since the late 1970s, the understanding of radical politics within the framework of Marxism has changed. Focusing on three important pillars of politics – the state, class, and party – radical political thought took the form of 'politics beyond the state, political organisation beyond the party, and political subjectivity beyond class'[6] (Badiou 2002: 95–97). This, we may say, is the crux of 'radical democracy' and an alternative

to the neo-liberal surrender of democracy to the market. It is an idea that has given fresh impetus to radical (leftist) social and political movements, from the 'liberation movements' of Latin America, to the anti-globalism demonstrations of the US and Europe. In the Middle East, which continues to be one of the most important landscapes for ethnic and religious conflicts, the Kurdish movement led by the PKK has put in motion a similar process through the promotion of its project of radical democracy.

This article is composed of five parts. First, we will trace the evolution of the PKK's ideological and political approach towards radical democracy in the 2000s. Then, we will discuss the concepts of confederalism and autonomy as developed by Bookchin. The third part looks in detail at the political projects developed within the context of radical democracy (the democratic republic, democratic confederalism, and democratic autonomy), considering their theoretical implications as well as their political dimensions. Fourth, our observations conducted at the local level in July 2011 will be presented. Fifth and finally, the meaning and political implications of this project of radical democracy for the Kurdish movement in Turkey will be discussed.

The PKK and the reinvention of politics

When the PKK was established as a political party in 1978, it had a classical communist party-type organizational structure, with a General Secretary as the leading party official and an Executive Committee responsible for direct operations. The highest executive institution was the Central Committee, and the Party Congress was the party's highest decision-making body. Over the years, however, the PKK grew more diverse, and what we refer to as the PKK today is actually a party-complex, a formation of parties and organizations comprising several parties (including the PKK), a co-party which separately organizes women,[7] sister parties in Iraq (Kurdistan Democratic Solution Party), Iran (Free Life Party of Kurdistan), and Syria (Democratic Union Party),[8] and guerilla forces[9] related to these parties. Next to this cluster of parties, the PKK established institutions through which integration and coordination of political practices take place. Today, the most important is the Union of Kurdistan Communities (*Koma Civakên Kurdistan*, KCK),[10] which basically is a network of village, city, and regional councils, whose assembly is called the Kurdistan People's Congress (*Kongra-Gel*).[11] The other is the National Congress of Kurdistan (*Kongreya Neteweyî ya Kurdistanê*, KNK), a pan-Kurdistan congress, which includes representatives from various political parties in Kurdistan as well as representatives from the Kurdish diaspora and ethnic and religious minorities in Kurdistan. It is difficult to represent the organization with a traditional organizational flowchart. As the members and sympathizers of the PKK refer to Abdullah Öcalan as the sun (*güneş*), we may develop this analogy and compare the organization of the party-complex to a planetary system: the sun is Abdullah Öcalan and the planets are the parties, armies, and institutions, which are in orbit around it.

The PKK organisational transition from classical national liberation movement based on Marxist-Leninist principles, to *sui-generis* organisation with the figure of Abdullah Öcalan as 'Divine King' (the supreme leader), has gone hand-in-hand with its ideological development. Originally (in the founding 1978 manifesto), the establishment of a united Kurdistan was envisaged as occurring in tandem with the uniting of the revolutionary forces in Turkey, the two peoples (Kurds and Turks) joining in their struggle for liberation. During the course of the party's existence, however, Öcalan tried to develop an original understanding of socialism, and, especially since his capture, he has further elaborated a distinctive understanding of socialism and revolution.

After 2000, the ideological framework of the PKK was established through a series of texts written by Öcalan and submitted as part of his legal defence to the different courts in which his cases were being tried. Published in Kurdish and Turkish, as well as other languages, the defence texts can be grouped into two: those submitted to the Turkish courts, and those submitted to European courts – the ECtHR in Strasbourg, and a court in Athens in a case concerning his expulsion from Greece. The first group consists mainly of two defence texts: the main text, submitted to the court in Imrali (the military/prison island on which Öcalan is held), and an annex, submitted to the Court of Appeals in Ankara in 1999 and to a local court in Urfa (a city in southeastern Turkey) in 2001. The title of these first texts as published translates as 'Declaration on the Solution of the Kurdish Question', and 'Urfa: The Symbol of history, divinity and wretched[ness] in the basin of the Tigris-Euphrates'. The second group of defence texts, submitted to the ECtHR in 2001, to an Athenian court in 2003, and to the Grand Chamber of the ECtHR in 2004, consisted of two books which together comprise three volumes. The first book (of two volumes) was published in English translation under the title *From Sumerian Clerical State towards People's Republic I-II* (2001), with the second book (and third volume) – known in PKK circles as the 'Athens Defence' – published as *The Defense of Free Man* (2003) and *Defending a People* (2004).[12] Lastly, Öcalan submitted another defence text to the ECtHR in Strasbourg concerning his case for the right of fair trial. Described by Öcalan as problematising capitalist modernity, this text was published in Turkish during 2009–10, in four volumes.

In his defence, Öcalan tries to develop an idea of politics that goes beyond what he calls 'primitive nationalism and classical leftism'. Referred to as 'radical democracy', this was developed over time as the three projects of a democratic republic, democratic confederalism, and democratic autonomy (though the democratic-confederalism and democratic-autonomy projects are intimately interrelated and might be considered as one). The project of the democratic republic aimed at reforming the political constitution of Turkey, disassociating the idea of a republic from the idea of nationalism: 'It is in the context of this project that the drafting of a new constitution became a tangible political demand on the part of the Kurdish movement. In

the constitution of the Republic of Turkey, citizenship has been equated with Turkishness, historically making Kurds invisible. A new constitution, it follows, has to define citizenship in civil terms' (Casier et. al. 2011: 115).

The idea of democratic confederalism is defined as a model for 'democratic self-government' (Öcalan 2008: 32). It is as an alternative project of democratisation, one which is to be organised from the bottom up, beginning at the local level. 'This project', Öcalan argues, 'builds on the self-government of local communities and is organised in the form of open councils, town councils, local parliaments, and larger congresses. The citizens themselves are agents of this kind of self-government, not state-based authorities'. The project of democratic autonomy provides the confederal system with particular ends: the development of its own social, cultural, and economic domains, through which political self-control becomes meaningful and significant. Actually, with confederalism referring especially to the administrative relationship between the local level democratic bodies, and autonomy to the independence of these, there would seem to be an implicit tension between the ideas of democratic autonomy and democratic confederalism, which may lead them to be less conflated than regarded as opposites.

The main difference between the projects of a democratic republic and of democratic confederalism and democratic autonomy is that the former has the state and the definition of citizenship as its focus, while the latter have a focus on the development of alternatives to the state, and build their expectations on the self-organisation of people. It is on this development of alternatives to the state that we focus here. More than an organisational perspective, in which the projects of democratic-confederalism and democratic-autonomy are seen to organise, and potentially in contradictory ways, we should consider democratic confederalism and democratic autonomy together as *strategically dispositive*: they give political orientation to the contemporary struggle of Kurds in Turkey.

Confederalism and autonomy

In custody, Öcalan has been inspired by the writings of Murray Bookchin, who, on several occasions wrote about democratic confederalism and democratic autonomy.[13] For Bookchin, these formed the basis for a rethinking of modern politics and a reconstruction of the Left, the issue which has become the central concern for Öcalan. 'Perhaps the greatest single failing of movements for social reconstruction', wrote Murray Bookchin in 1991, referring in particular to the Left and organisations that claim to speak for the oppressed, 'is their lack of a politics that will carry people beyond the limits established by the status quo' (Bookchin 1991: 3). For Bookchin, such a social reconstruction had to reach beyond the focus of statecraft, or more specifically, the idea of the nation-state (Bookchin 1990: 13; 1991: 7).

Bookchin differentiates between two ideas of politics, the Hellenic model and the Roman model, which gave rise to two different understandings of

government: the first a participatory-democratic form of politics, and the second a centralist statist form (White 2008: 159). The Roman model has become dominant in modern times, informing American and French constitutionalists in the eighteenth century, while the Athens model exists as a underground counter-current, finding expression in the Commune of Paris in 1871, the councils (soviets) in the spring time of the revolution in Russia in 1917, and the Spanish Revolution in 1936.[14] The statist, centralised Roman model, on the contrary, has no free citizens, but a herd of subjects (Kropotkin 1897), but the Hellenic model has an active citizenry (Bookchin 1990: 11).

Bookchin projects his political imaginary for the recovery of humans as citizens onto the idea of confederalism, defined as 'the interlinking of communities with one another through recallable deputies mandated by municipal citizens' assemblies'. Bookchin considers this an 'alternative to the nation-state' (Bookchin, 1991: 7). Elsewhere, Bookchin (1990: 9) defines confederalism as 'a network of administrative councils whose members are elected from popular face-to-face democratic alliances, in the various villages, towns, and even neighbourhoods of large cities.' These administrative councils are just that, bodies that administrate. They are closely controlled and do not make policy, which is a power that remain in the hands of the community itself:

> The members of these councils are strictly mandated, recallable, and responsible to the assemblies that choose them for the purpose of coordinating and administering the policies formulated by the assemblies themselves. Their function is thus a purely administrative and practical one, not a policy making one like the function of representatives in republican systems of government.
>
> (Bookchin 1990: 10)[15]

According to Bookchin, confederalism reaches its fullest development in relation to a project of autonomy, 'when placing local farms, factories, and other enterprises in local municipal hands', or, 'when a community (...) begins to manage its own economic resources in an interlinked way with other communities' (Bookchin 1990: 11). In this model, the economy is placed in the custody of the confederal councils, and thus it is 'neither collectivized nor privatized, it is common' (Bookchin 1990: 10). As such, confederalism and autonomy are key notions in Bookchin's 'radically new configuration of society' (Bookchin 1990: 4). In these projects of confederalism and autonomy, means (defined as a network model of localised, small-scale self-organisation and self-administration) and ends (defined as community controlled economies) conflate. In combination, they can be considered an alternative politics for going beyond those of the nation-state.

Influenced by these ideas, Öcalan developed a similar understanding of confederalism. In parallel with his historical analysis of civilisation based on

a critique of the state, Öcalan condemned the failure of real socialism and national liberation movements, which were considered to be trapped in the ideas of the state and state-making. Instead, he elaborated on the protracted effects of Neolithic society, whose communal values could not have been completely destroyed by the development of hierarchical society built upon the state. Those communal values – summarised as organisation conscious of gender, life compatible with nature, and society based on solidarity (essentially, expressions of feminism, ecology, and socialism) – underlie Öcalan's conception of democracy in the form of democratic confederalism. On the basis of these values, Öcalan developed a project of democratic-confederalism organised at four levels (Karasu 2009: 84–85). At the bottom are the communes in the village and districts, which are interrelated at the levels of town, city, and region. Next is the organisation of social categories, such as women and the youth. A further level of organisation occurs in the cultural realm, regarding the frameworks for different ethnic/religious/cultural identities. The fourth and final level is that of civil society organisations. It is in this sense that democratic confederalism, through its basis in assemblies at the village/district, city, and regional levels, refers to organisation of the whole society from the bottom-up (Karasu 2009: 80).[16]

Building democratic confederalism and autonomy in the Kurdish context

Since 2005, the PKK and all affiliated organisations have been restructured on the basis of this project under the name of the Union of Kurdistan Communities (*Koma Civakên Kurdistan*, KCK), a societal organisation presented as an alternative to the nation-state. Aiming to organise itself from the bottom up in the form of assemblies, the KCK is 'a movement which struggles to establish its own democracy, neither grounded on the existing nation-states nor seeing them as the obstacle' (PKK 2005: 175). In its founding text, the 'KCK Contract', its main aim is defined in terms of a struggle for the expansion of a radical democracy, which is based upon peoples' democratic organisations and decision-making power.[17] The KCK Contract sets forth a new mechanism of social relations which transcends the statist mentality. In this sense, democratic confederalism, as the main organising idea of the KCK, is valid everywhere that Kurds live, even in Iraq, where Kurds have constitutional rights that include self-governance of their region in a federal state structure. In this project, there are two determining factors: the notion of democracy as the people's power in society (rather than as a form of government), and the exclusion of the state from this notion. '[D]emocratic confederalism as a form of political and social system beyond the state is a project for a free life. It has nothing to do with recognition by states. Even though states do not recognize it, the Kurdish people will construct it. If they recognized it, for example within a project of democratic autonomy, it would be easier to construct a democratic confederal system which would be in the end the product of Kurds' own struggle' (Karasu 2009: 216–17).[18] Accordingly, the new Kurdish project gave birth to another form of organisation, the Democratic Society Congress (*Demokratik Toplum Kongresi*, DTK), founded on the basis of the following argument:

> Today we have some district and town councils, though local and inadequate. Since they are not well founded, the Kurdish people still bring their demands to the political party and reflect them through it to the state. […] If the Kurdish people assemble under the roof of *this congress*, they would become the interlocutor for a solution. And the state, which comes to an agreement with this body, relinquishes its old structure.
>
> (italics added)[19]

The congress referred to is the assembly of local councils, the confederate form of direct democracy that Bookchin refers to in his work on 'libertarian municipalism', and that Öcalan refers to as 'democracy without the state'. As such, the DTK is not simply another organisation, but part of the attempt to forge a new political paradigm, defined by the direct and continual exercise of the people's power through village, town, and city councils. Some 600 delegates attended the first (foundational) meeting of the Congress in October 2007, during which the project for democratic autonomy became a key issue. Successive Congresses have been held since then – the fourth in August 2010 and the fifth in July 2011 – and the DTK now has a permanent chamber of 101 persons, elected biannually from 850 delegates (Akkaya and Jongerden 2012). The DTK is organised at the levels of village (*köy*), rural area, (*belde*), urban neighbourhood (*mahalle*), district (*ilçe*), city (*kent*), and the region (*bölge*), which is referred to as 'Northern Kurdistan'. The Congress has a *divan* (executive committee) composed of five persons, among whom one acts as a spokes(wo)man.[20]

Instrumental to this development has been a parallel process in the realm of conventional politics, with the pro-Kurdish party voicing democratic autonomy as its political project. It was the predecessor to the Peace and Democracy Party (*Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi*, BDP), the Democratic Society Party (*Demokratik Toplum Partisi*, DTP) that had organised the DTK, and at its second Congress, a document titled 'Democratic Solution to the Kurdish Question – Democratic Autonomy Project' was officially recognised. This document consists of three parts, discussing the 'reform [of] Turkey's political-administrative structure', 'proposals for [a] solution to economic and social problems of the region' and a 'plan of action for the termination of clashes'.[21] The Congress report also called for radical reforms in Turkey's political and administrative structure in order to ensure democratisation and to develop problem-solving approaches involving a strengthening of the local level. Instead of autonomy based on 'ethnicity' or

'territory', it suggested regional and local structures which would allow for the expression of cultural differences. At the same Congress and in relation to that, the DTP emphasised the importance of establishing assemblies at each level in society. In line with the idea of self-organisation and autonomy, DTP municipalities initiated a 'multilingual municipality service', sparking heated debate.[22] Municipality signs were erected in Kurdish and Turkish, and local shopkeepers followed suit.

All these activities at the local government level have been rooted in the free municipalism model (*özgür belediyecilik modeli*), adopted by the DTP at a three-day conference in February 2008, which takes the concept of free citizen (*özgür yurttaş*) as its starting point. This concept includes basic civil liberties, such as freedom of speech and organisation, but also freedom of ethnic, religious, cultural, and linguistic identity, and the freedom to develop a cultural and national identity. The free municipalism model aims to realise a bottom-up participative administrative body, from local to provincial levels, in which better services would be provided and problems concerning identity resolved. The idea of free municipalism is a theme discussed by Bookchin, too, and gives us a clue as to how democratic confederalism can be translated into democratic autonomy.[23]

Importantly, through these activities at the level of local governments, Kurdish politics gained supremacy in appropriating the space which refers to 'the potential of social movements to alter power structures in a given polity' (Gambetti 2009: 44). This appropriated Kurdish public space 'marked the opening of differential political and social spaces within the territory of the nation-state' (Gambetti 2009: 60). In this sense, the municipalities under the control of pro-Kurdish party since 1999 have increasingly formed a kind of self-ruling regional body, referred to, on the basis of the case of Diyarbakır, as engaging in 'decolonisation' (Gambetti 2008). Interestingly, in 2010 and 2011, it was around the issue of democratic confederalism and democratic autonomy that the Kurdish movement and the Left and Green movements in Turkey started to re-assemble. As such, this project of radical democracy carries the promise of a wider political realignment.

Local encounters

So what exactly is going on at the local level? Is democratic confederalism and autonomy more than a slogan? Is it practiced, and if so how? We tried to find answers to these questions in the city of Diyarbakır. On a summer evening in July 2011, we navigated through narrow streets in Bağlar, a crowded, quite poor district near the city centre, on our way to an appointment with representatives of a neighbourhood council. The council, we were informed, was part of a system of democratic confederalism, a project discussed and developed by the Kurdish movement over the last few years. The project of democratic confederalism, a local party leader of the BDP in Diyarbakir told us, is an alternative to 'capitalism, which historically found

its ideological, organisational, and political form in the nation-state', and also to the collapsed model of what used to be 'real existing socialism', which 'failed to develop political alternatives'. As a paradigm, a local party administrator told us, democratic confederalism 'rejects centralism and the state and welcomes the self-organisation of the people and their taking responsibility of their daily affairs and the places they live'. As such, the party administrator emphasised, 'democratic confederalism is not oriented towards the taking over of state power, or focussed on the state, but on developing alternative forms of power through self-organisation'. 'Democratic confederalism is shaking us up', one of our informants explains. It is not something one simply establishes, but 'what is developed as a process'.

Clearly the guiding philosophy has been well internalised among the party members in their 'capital city' or 'fortress', as Diyarbakir has been termed. What interested us more, however, was how the theory actually manifested at local level, in the spatial setting of daily lives (and especially, in the lives of those in the poorer areas of Bağlar and Sur, as opposed to those living in the gated communities of the city's more prosperous neighbourhoods, Yenişehir and Kayapinar). How had these councils actually been established? Who were its members, and how did the councils work? The council we were heading to was located on the ground floor of an apartment building, the main form of accommodation in the neighbourhood. Apart from a large room which was used for meetings, there was a small kitchen, an office, and a smaller meeting room, arranged as a *şark köşesi* ('oriental corner'), with carpets on the floor and cushions alongside the walls, which one can sit on and lean against. On the bulletin board in the meeting room were invitations to the council to be present at weddings and other celebrations.

The invitations were evidence of a level of connection between the community and the council that supported the subjective sense of accessibility we felt, beyond, that is, the warmth that might be expected to be extended to special visitors from outside. The very distance from the street to the inner sanctum of this organ of governance, a couple of metres, further testified to its closeness to everyday life. In fact, the comparison that invited itself was not to the usually bodies of local government, with their various (forms of) administrative-bureaucratic and social-environmental barriers (situated in non-residential or up-market neighbourhoods, formal décor, access by appointment, staffing by paid employees, etc.) that combine to afford a level of emotional distance that further detaches them from everyday human experience and thus from ordinary people. Rather, the obvious parallel was with outreach facilities and drop-in centres, a decentralised institutional format that has emerged in service provision over recent decades, including in local government – but there, remaining only at a very low level of development (generally confined to single functions, like housing, and at the strategic level applied little and haphazardly).

We were welcomed by some eight people, members of the neighbourhood council (*mahalle meclisi*), which counts twenty members in all, of whom

twelve are male and eight are female. The neighbourhood has a population of about 60,000 people (out of 350,000 who live in the Bağlar district as a whole). How did members see their role, what were their own perceptions about what they were doing? 'Our aim', the chair of the council explained, 'is to face the problems in our lives, in our neighbourhood, and solve them by ourselves without being dependent on or needing the state'. Others add that 'the state is a hump on the back of the people,' and 'we try to live without the state'. However, they added, 'the idea of the state is nested in the minds of people, and it is difficult to make people think about politics without making reference to the state, so we are both practising self-organisation as well as learning to understand what it is by doing it'. This is a work in progress. İnce (2010: 82) refers to this particular type of process as a conflation of means and ends: by practising the ends, people learn to enhance their horizon of action. Citing Eduardo Galeano, İnce argues that this understanding unfolds as follows: 'Utopia is on the horizon: when I walk two steps, it takes two steps back ... I walk ten steps, and it is ten steps further away. What is utopia for? It is for this, for walking.' In a similar way, the members of this council look upon the council as both practicing self-governance and learning to understand the meaning of self-governance through doing it – learning democracy and learning self-organisation by trying to realise it in practice, and in this particular case, by practicing democracy and self-organisation at the neighbourhood level, instead of demanding democracy from the state.

The neighbourhood council attempts and aims to make a difference at the local level, and in the daily lives of people. From a substantive view, what they do, among other things, is mediate in conflict between families and shopkeepers, organise courses for the youth (in music, theatre, drawing, etc.), and provide information and education on women rights and violence against women. Again, the foregrounding of women's issues is clear; the prominent provision of youth services contrasts with its generally under-emphasised position in conventional local government (and again, as in the gender case, the reasons why this type of institution may work better for young people can be listed at some length); and in local conflict resolution, there appears to be the germ of an idea for local authority that may have materialised here precisely because of the small-scale organisation assumed by a bottom-up approach to governance. Of course, this is only a start: 'we can't work on everything: we don't have the capacity or capability to deal with the high unemployment and major economic problems'.

Final remarks

The following remarks briefly review the topic at hand from the perspectives of recent Kurdish/Turkish history, of the political implications and significance for the Kurdish movement, and of a possible future. First, the mobilisation of the Kurdish national movement around the project for

democratic autonomy reveals the ascending identity demands of Turkey's Kurds (and Kurds generally). This was interpreted as a new era in legal Kurdish politics, in which the DTP, and then the BDP, came to play an important role in policy development and implementation aimed at a resolution of issues, in contrast to the limited role of previous legal Kurdish parties (People's Labour Party, Democracy Party, People's Democracy Party, and Democratic People's Party),[24] all of which were banned, one after another, by the Constitutional Court and thus had to confine themselves to a struggle for existence. Indeed, it was largely under the protective umbrella of local authority and provincial control by the Kurdish party that the foundations for the democratic autonomy-confederalism were constructed.

However, following the DTP's success in the local elections of 2009, in which the governing AKP effectively lost the pre-dominantly Kurdish southeast, and after the subsequent failure of a governmental initiative (the 'Kurdish opening'), a huge police operation was launched against the members of the DTP, which was then banned. The DTP election success was underscored in similar fashion by the BDP in national votes during 2011 (a referendum on constitutional reform and a general election), and the joint attempt by the state (judiciary) and the government (AKP) to disempower the Kurdish party continued.[25] Over the course of the past two years, close to 9,000 DTP and BDP members and employees have been taken into custody, with almost four thousand arrested, including elected deputies, mayors, members of municipality councils, and party executives (Bianet 2011a). Charges have been brought against them for 'disrupting the unity of the state and [its] territorial integrity', 'membership and administration of a terrorist organization' (read: the PKK) and 'assisting and accommodating a terrorist organization' (the KCK being cited as 'the urban wing of the PKK'). The primary trial of some 150 defendants in Diyarbakır has been highly controversial, as the court has not permitted the use of the Kurdish language in defence speeches. Elsewhere, however, there have been convictions and sentences, including a total of 91 years' imprisonment that was meted out to eleven people in the Ağrı KCK Turkey Assembly Case where no defence was made after the request to use Kurdish was dismissed (Bianet 2011b). While the Kurdish movement tries to develop an understanding of politics that denies the state, the Turkish state makes the Kurdish movement a central concern.

The harshness of the state response to the radical nature of the democratic autonomy and democratic confederalism challenge is clear. The attempt of the Kurdish movement at radical innovation and a reinvention of politics is clearly considered a threat by the authorities. The ideas of democratic autonomy and democratic confederalism are radical in the sense that they emphasise: (1) self-organisation and self-administration/governance as a perspective for doing politics, a 'do it yourself' approach, and they do not transfer the capacity to do politics to the state through systems of representation; and (2) the enactment of future objectives in present practices,

referred to by some as 'prefigurative' (Breines 1989; Downing 2001; Gordon 2008; Maeckelbergh 2009: 66–68; Milberry 2009). The former, 'do it yourself' approach, is a 'hands on' politics that assumes accessibility. In the best tradition of revolutionary politics, it also assumes responsibility: the more that the people can be said to constitute the government, the less they – or we – can take refuge in resignation and 'blame it all on the government'. The latter, 'prefigurative politics', is arguably of even more fundamental significance, making a claim to our very approach to politics itself. 'Prefigurative politics', argue activists, 'is based on the notion that the future society is how we act in the present, what kinds of interactions, processes, structures, institutions, and associations we create right now, and how we live our lives'.[26] According to Maeckelbergh (2009: 67), in prefigurative practices, the temporal distinction is removed between struggle in the present and struggle towards a goal in the future. With the projects of democratic confederalism and democratic autonomy, democracy is not a demand for reform, eventually taking place (or not), but something practised, in the here and now. This is what (Maeckelbergh 2009: 67) refers to as the conflation of ends and means. The two projects put their principles into practise now, instead of imagining them as the foundation of a better, but not yet present, future (Downing, 2001). This is very different way of understanding social change, since it does not try to realise this by formulating objectives, struggling to get these objectives accepted by institutions, followed by their subsequent implementations in policies and plans. Prefiguration is constructing the alternatives that embody and promote the values one adheres to, and doing so here, today, and now.

As indicated earlier, since the state is not the main frame of reference in democratic confederalism, demands or expectations are not directed to the state, but shaped in the daily lives by people themselves. As Karasu emphasises, the system is based on self-administration and self-performance, and as such autonomy is embedded (or prefigured) in the approach of democratic confederalism: 'In bourgeois thinking the right to self-determination is formulated in terms of establishing a state. But this is not the socialist understanding of self-determination. We think democratic confederalism is the best possible way of practising self-determination. … Since democratic-confederalism does not take the state as its main frame, it is also not about changing borders. On the contrary, it is a way of thinking and doing which is non-statist. The frame of reference in democratic confederalism is developing a system of people's democracy on the basis of self-organisation. As such, people develop their own institutions, councils. If people organise themselves from bottom-up, and establish relations with each other, with other councils, democratic confederalism renders borders as insignificant' (Karasu 2009: 217–19 and 208–10).

Finally, in discussing what this project has meant for the Kurdish movement in Turkey, it is evident that the organisation of all segments of society from the bottom up, under the principle of democratic confederalism and

autonomy, has covered some very different fields of social life and required a wide range of activities. The PKK's project of radical democracy, especially the idea of democratic confederalism, developing a bottom-up democratic system beyond existing borders, aims to render those borders flexible, porous, and (in the long term) irrelevant. In fact, through its political projects of a democratic republic, democratic autonomy, and democratic confederalism, the PKK is developing a new agenda for self-determination, while simultaneously going beyond the concept of the nation-state. More importantly, perhaps, the PKK managed during this period to assemble Kurdish identity demands into a project of radical democracy. This has been made possible mainly through the elaboration of new ideological and political approaches, which created opportunities for the PKK to enlarge its scope of interest and activities, thereby creating more space for a Kurdish public sphere. In aiming at the transformation of society in all its aspects, rather than the capture of state power through armed struggle, PKK efforts now allow for a broader field of operation.

All these activities show that the PKK's project of radical democracy involves an active agency in the form of a force of struggle, an ongoing endeavour that develops from the scale of the local/communal to the regional/societal and global/categorical, rather than a political project imposed from above. In this sense, the democratic confederalism and democratic autonomy projects as formulated by the Kurdish movement presents a radical alternative which goes beyond the boundaries of the existing political regime. Above all, it is based on a radical conception of democracy which aims at the disassociation of democracy from nationalism, by excluding state and nation, and considering democracy as an unrestricted and unmediated form of people's sovereignty rather than a form of government. Therefore, this project for democratic autonomy goes beyond the boundaries of the existing political regime. This includes the framework elaborated on the basis of the EU *acquis communautaire*, which uses liberal democracy as its benchmark, although there is an ongoing discussion regarding the suitability of the radical democracy proposal for the EU Regional Policy, given that it could be a useful step on the way to a solution of the Kurdish question (by tackling the problem of centralism in Turkey). In sum, the Kurdish movement in Turkey, which has developed a new project for radical democracy based on the conception of 'politics beyond the state, political organisation beyond the party, and political subjectivity beyond class' might have the opportunity to change the centralist tradition of political life in Turkey, as well as the statist and class-reductionist approach of the Left.

Notes

1 We thank Janet Biehl for her critical reading and comments on a draft version of this text.

2 This is not to imply that the violent struggle necessarily failed, even if it did not manage to attain the original ultimate objective; it does imply, however, that the

people's warfare strategy appears to have become regarded by the PKK as unsuited to the further advancement of its long-term interests (as evidenced, indeed, by lengthy unilateral ceasefires).

3 The precise relationship between Öcalan's capture and the PKK's change of direction is unclear, though it would probably be wrong to argue simply that one caused the other.

4 Elsewhere, we have discussed the PKK's project for radical democracy in relation to the work of Ernesto Laclau, Chantall Mouffe, Antonio Negri, and Michael Hardt (Akkaya and Jongerden, 2012). Here, we discuss the PKK's project in relation to the work of Murray Bookchin.

5 Born in New York to Russian Jewish immigrants, Murray Bookchin (1921–2007) was active in the youth movement of the Communist Party of the USA in his teens, but he broke with it at the end of the 1930s. Initially he aligned himself with the Trotskyites and the Socialist Workers Party, but he had considerable difficulties with their hierarchical and centralist outlook, and he started to consider himself a libertarian socialist from the 1950s onwards. In *The Rise of Urbanization and the Decline of Citizenship* (1986; republished as *Urbanization Without Cities* [1992] and *From Urbanization to Cities* [1995]), he 'narrates a history of civic self-management and confederalism in the Western democratic tradition, beginning in ancient Greece and proceeding through medieval European towns and to the popular institutions in several revolutions, particularly the American and French'. It is from this that Bookchin formulates his political project of 'libertarian municipalism' (http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/Anarchist_Archives/bookchin/bio1.html).

6 Newman credited anarchism with being the 'unacknowledged referent' in this change for current debates in radical political philosophy (Newman 2010). In this article, Newman also admitted the radical nature of certain forms of identity politics in many non-Western societies, explicitly referring to the struggle of the Kurds.

7 Women's organizations in the PKK have a long history. The first Union of Women Guerrillas was formed in 1995, followed by the first women's party in 1999. The name of the women's party has changed several times - it currently operates under the name of Freedom Party of Women of Kurdistan (*Partîya Azadîya Jin a Kurdistan*, PAJK). The PAJK functions as the ideological centre for women's groups organized autonomously, with the Community of Assertive Women (*Koma Jinen Bilind*, KJB) as the front organization and the Union of Free Women (*Yekîtîya Jinen Azad*, YJA-STAR) as the organization of women guerrillas.

8 In Iraq, the Kurdistan Democratic Solution Party (*Partiya Çareseriya Demokratik a Kurdistan*, PÇDK) formed in 2002; in Iran, the Kurdistan Free Life Party (*Partiya Jiyana Azad a Kurdistan*, PJAK) was formed in 2004; in Syria, the Democratic Union Party (*Partiya Yekitiya Demokratik*, PYD) was also established in 2004.

9 The guerrilla forces are organized mainly into three bodies: the People's Defense Forces (*Hêzên Parastina Gel*, HPG), which constitutes the military organization of the party-movement; the Forces of Eastern Kurdistan (*Hezî Rojhelatî Kurdistan*, HRK), which is working parallel to the political goals of the PJAK; and the YJA-STAR, the organization of women guerrillas.

10 The Council of Associations in Kurdistan (*Koma Komalan Kurdistan*, KKK), later renamed the Union of Kurdistan Communities (*Koma Civakên Kurdistan*, KCK), is both a concept embodying the idea of democratic confederalism as developed by Öcalan, and a societal organization presented as an alternative to the nation-state and which Öcalan sees as a model for the resolution of the problems of the Middle East. In the PKK party complex, the KCK can be considered the executive body, with all parties and organizations coordinated through it. See PKK 2005, 175-243.

11 *Kongra-Gel* is the people's front within the PKK complex (PKK 2005: 97) and to some extent takes over the functions of the National Liberation Front of Kurdistan (*Eniya Rizgariya Netewa Kurdistan*, ERNK), which was abolished in 2000. It can be considered the legislative body, as is evident from its name, which means People's Congress.

12 The first book was published in English, in two volumes: *Prison Writings: The Roots of Civilization* (2007), and *Prison Writings: The PKK and the Kurdish Question in the 21st century* (2011). For reviews of the first volume, see Newens (2007), and for both, see Gunter (2007, 2011).

13 In his "prison notes," *i.e.*, his summaries of his talks with his lawyers, Öcalan refers to Bookchin on several occasions. In the period 2002-2008, there are references to Bookchin in the notes dated 28 August 2002, 9 June 2004, 1 September 2004, 1 December 2004, 4 May 2005, 22 November 2006, and June 18, 2008. Öcalan recommends that his followers read Bookchin and practice what they find there.

14 Bookchin admired and often mentioned these instances of revolutionary council democracy: the 1871 Paris Commune, the Russians of 1905 and 1917, and the Spanish in 1936. But as he explained, they are instances of council democracy, not assembly democracy. Instances of 'face-to-face' or assembly democracy are scarcer in history, but are even more important as precedents: besides Athens (minus patriarchy and slavery), they were the New England town meetings of the American Revolution (1770s) and the Parisian sectional assemblies of 1793. Bookchin first wrote about them in *Forms of Freedom* (1968) and mentioned them often in the decades afterward. See also *The Third Revolution*, volume 1 (1996).

15 There is, therefore, no rationalist fiction of a 'social contract', wherein the many consent to be ruled by the few in the interests of the many. This Enlightenment conception, it would be argued, essentially operated as a justification for the capital-based extension of power from the aristocracy to the bourgeoisie.

16 Öcalan's notion of 'bottom-up', therefore, is not exactly (or only) the usual one of geographical/numerical scale, going from the small/local to the large/regional, but (also) a more abstract one composed of cultural levels, characterisable as ascending from the communal/parochial to the societal/categorical.

17 http://www.ygk-info.com/Onderlik/sozlesme/index.html. (The Introduction, comprising Öcalan's 2005 'Declaration of Democratic Confederalism in Kurdistan', is available in English at http://www.freemedialibrary.com). The English translation 'contract' (Kurdish: *Peyman*, Turkish: *sözleşme*) may be understood as indicating its position as an alternative to Rousseau's *contract social*.

18 The issue of state recognition invites the question of other possible state responses, including the one that is, in fact, currently being followed: namely, suppression.

19 Kürt Sorununda Çözüme Doğru Demokratik Özerklik 2009: 95.

20 The general organizational structure of the DTK is as follows:
The General Assembly (850 delegates): From the 850 delegates, 500 are elected from the population, 300 delegates are elected political representatives – MPs, mayors and members of provincial councils from the principle Kurdish political party, the Peace and Democracy Party (*Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi*, BDP), and others who have been elected in conventional political forums – and 50 are reserved for representatives of religious minorities, academics, or others with particular expertise. For the 2011 election of the 500 'popular' delegates, elections were organised in 43 districts.
The Permanent Chamber: 101 delegates
The Coordination Council: 13 delegates (including two co-chairs; one man and one woman)

The Executive Committee: five delegates.
This structure is further enlarged with the regional assemblies (at least 75 delegates), the city assemblies (at least 25 delegates), the district (Town) assemblies (at least 15 delegates), and the village and neighbourhood assemblies (at least seven delegates). There are also different committees/commissions in the DTK which are: Status and Law Commission, Ecology and Local Governments Commission, Economy and Employment Commission, Language and Education Commission Social Policies Commission, Men-Women Equality Commission, Women Commission, Youth Commission, Culture-Art and Science Commission, Faith Commission, Diplomacy Commission, and Organization Commission.

21 This document can be accessed online on the website of the Kurdish Institute in Brussels. http://kurdishinstitute.be/english/5395-dtp-democratic-society-party.html

22 In 2007, mayor of the Sur municipality in Diyarbakır, Abdullah Demirbas, offered municipal services in Kurdish, Armenian, and Syriac, in addition to Turkish, especially at municipality reception desks and through phone lines. The municipality also published a children's magazine in all of those languages and prepared story books for children in Kurdish. Because of this multilingual project, the municipal council was dissolved, and Demirbas taken from office and charged with abuse of position and breaching the Turkish alphabet law (he was subsequently re-elected with an increased vote). For more details, see Zeydanlıoğlu in this volume.

23 A confederalist approach, Bookchin argues, calls for municipilisation of the economy: 'It proposes that land and enterprises be placed increasingly in the custody of the community[,] more precisely, the custody of citizens in free assemblies and their deputies in confederal councils. How work should be planned, what technologies should be used, how goods should be distributed are questions that can only be resolved in practice. (…) In such a municipal economy – confederal, interdependent, and rational by ecological, not simply technological, standards – we would expect that the special interests that divide people today into workers, professionals, managers, and the like would be melded into a general interest in which people see themselves as citizens guided strictly by the needs of their community and region' (Bookchin 1991: 9).

24 HEP (*Halkın Emek Partisi*, People's Labour Party), DEP (*Demokrasi Partisi*, Democracy Party), HADEP (*Halkın Demokrasi Partisi*, People's Democracy Party), DEHAP (*Demokratik Halk Partisi*, Democratic People's Party).

25 For review and analysis of this history, see Casier, Hilton & Jongerden (2009); Casier, Jongerden & Walker, (2011).

26 http://interactivist.autonomedia.org/node/935

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9 The impact of the EU on minority rights

The Kurds as a case

Zelal B. Kızılkan Kısacık

Introduction

The increasing focus of European organizations, such as the Council of Europe (CoE) and the European Union (EU), on minority protection since the disintegration of Communist bloc countries has promoted a new political context and opportunity structure for minority-majority relations. As a forgotten issue throughout the Cold War, minority protection has taken part in the political agenda of Europe. This is due to the widespread mobilization of ethnic groups, particularly in the former Yugoslavia. Empowering minority groups by conferring their cultural and linguistic rights was/has been regarded a way to realize peace and stability in the ethnically fragmented countries. Since then, most of the international and European institutions have taken positive measures to improve the status of minorities.

As a major supranational institution, the EU is one these external bodies promoting domestic changes in this policy-legal issue area. It requires candidate countries to demonstrate 'stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and respect for and protection of minorities', and it stipulates in the Treaty of Lisbon that 'respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities' as one of the foundational value of the Union. That is why any European state has to respect these principles and be committed to promoting them to become a member of the Union. Hence, prospective members must reach certain benchmarks in their treatment of minorities before they accede to membership. This strategy provided the EU with an important instrument for having an impact on minority protection in the candidate countries.

Turkey is one applicant countries in which the leverage of the EU on its minority policies is considerable. Until recently, Turkey prevented the articulation of language and cultural rights for the Kurds. Non recognition of Kurdish identity rights was among the most important considerations in Turkey-EU relations. However, in the aftermath of the Helsinki European Council in 1999, Turkey has undertaken important steps with respect to